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MOSCOW AND THE MIDDLE EAST

The USSR's policy toward the Middle East is entering a new and more active phase. For a year, the Soviets have had to sit on the sidelines, hoping that the US diplomatic effort would falter and that they could then get back in the game. Moscow now appears to believe that this moment has arrived.

The Soviets cannot compete effectively with the US in two major areas: influence on Israel and on the conservative oil-producing states. Offsetting these Soviet disadvantages are:

- Moscow's long-standing good relations with the Syrians and the Palestinians, and
- its role as an arms supplier. This factor in particular gives the USSR reason to believe it can compete with the US for influence in Egypt.

Egypt's Key Role

During the past year, the Soviets resorted to an arms embargo in an attempt to force Sadat into policies more to their liking. This had mixed results--first fueling but more recently tempering Sadat's public criticism of the Soviets. Soviet strategy has been to wait until the bloom began to come off Sadat's new relationship with the US. Brezhnev's decision to go to Cairo is a major departure for him--he has never before risked this kind of personal identification with the Egyptian quagmire. Announcement of a Brezhnev trip probably signals both a Soviet decision that the time is now right for considerable normalization of relations and a decision in principle to resume significant military aid--although the USSR can be expected to dicker and delay as usual over details and manipulate deliveries to influence Sadat's course.

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The Palestinians

Moscow has long-standing ties with the Palestinians and can embrace their cause at minimal cost. During the last few months, the Soviets have:

--urged the Palestinians to take their case to the UN.

--pressed them to prepare for a role at Geneva.

--openly endorsed the idea of a Palestinian state.

Apart from hoping to garner political credit as a principal patron of a Palestinian state, the Soviets see in vigorous support for the Palestinians their best chance for an influential role at Geneva. This may not work, of course, but in the meantime the Soviets draw some comfort from the fact that the Palestinian issue complicates US negotiating efforts.

To balance the Palestinian embrace, the Soviets have become increasingly explicit in supporting the continued existence of Israel and periodically dangle their interest in eventually resuming diplomatic ties with Tel Aviv. Moscow wants to signal that it does not support demands for the dismemberment of Israel. It also hopes to convey to the Arabs that someday Moscow too will be able to speak directly to Tel Aviv.

Moscow, Washington, and a Settlement

Soviet attacks on the US role are increasing. Soviet propaganda has been tough on the US all along, but now Soviet officials--evidently including Brezhnev himself--are explicitly charging the US with doubledealing with the Arabs and identifying Washington as the source of Israeli

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intransigence. For the first time, Moscow has begun to directly criticize Secretary Kissinger, suggesting that he is no longer "strong enough" to exert pressure on Israel.

This behavior heightens the question of Soviet attitudes toward a settlement itself. Moscow cannot come out against a settlement acceptable to the Arabs, nor can it run the risk of jeopardizing its relations with the US by openly sabotaging the prospects for peace. Nonetheless, the Soviets recognize that it is the US, not the USSR, that stands to benefit from peace in the Middle East. The Soviets therefore will argue that there can be progress toward a Middle East settlement only if they are involved, and that a settlement will last only if it gives them a continuing role there.

If they are frustrated on this, they seem likely to intensify their efforts to throw a spoke into US diplomatic efforts. They know this would increase the risk of war, but they would hope that war itself could still be avoided.

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